

FACULTY OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY - SOC 175

Australian and Global Societies

ASSIGNMENT 2: A Life History

*Conduct an in-depth life-history interview then analyse the **intersection of history and social structure/conditions** in the life you have examined.*

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The interviewee for this analysis is George Stevens, born into “The *Lucky* Generation? A generation whose childhood and adolescence were darkened by the twin shadows of the Great Depression and World War II” (Mackay 1997: p14). Those born into this time learned the rigorous lessons that massive economic down turn, unprecedented unemployment and worldwide upheaval brought to bear upon them. These macro institutional, social and cultural shifts caused enormous pressure in peoples everyday lives, shaping the personalities and ethics of the *Lucky Generation* by “forging reoccurring themes of loyalty, saving, the work ethic, the sense of mutual obligation and patriotism” (Mackay: p17) into their psyche. These ethics became the foundation by which many people growing up in this time set the course for their whole life’s journey. George Stevens was no exception, and it is how these factors affected his family, work and social life, that form this analysis of his life history.

(See Appendix (i) *Life Time Line Chart*)

George Stevens was born in Brisbane in 1929 and early life was remembered fondly despite his family being poor, however in 1937 a move to Melbourne altered everything. No longer were sights, sounds and places familiar, he was disenfranchised from his usual social norms, city life versed country town (as suburban Brisbane was then), and this culture clash caused him much anxiety. His father joined the air force during the war, and was

frequently absent. Lacking the attention she needed, his mother left the family for another man, then when his elder brother went on to join the army, George was left to be cared for by his aging and ill grandparents. This unhappy situation became the catalysis for the young teenager to leave home early at 15 years old. Leaving home early was not uncommon in the 1930's and 40's, however it was more prevalent among lower income families where the lack of "parental investment in their children, including economic and emotional resources, influenced generationally the progress that young adults made on their own economic and family pathways" (Goldscheider & Goldscheider 1998: p755)

Pressures from both inside his own family and the accumulated effects of a society at war, pushed George out into the world on his own. He joined the lighthouse supply ship fleet that serviced the Victorian south coast. This was in George Stevens own words *"magic – it really was – high adventure, all of a sudden I felt like I was with a family"* (Stevens: 2009). A telling statement for a disillusioned young man. It was the beginning of a career at sea, briefly in merchant shipping, then in the navy.

The Royal Australian Navy (RAN) is both an institution and social structure, with its rigid rules and a complex organisational framework, "enlisted men can gain basic seamanship qualifications and then move on to specialist training in a trade known as a *rate*" (Australian War Memorial archives). George Stevens enlisted at 17.5 years old and trained as a radio operator, the navy offered him order, a well defined system of what to do and how to do it, companionship and adventure. Within the naval sphere opportunities to travel, broaden knowledge and skills, develop respect and loyalty were offered. This became a positive collaboration between an institutionalised social structure and a private individual, showing how providing conditions to thrive, in return for hard work, loyalty and commitment created, at the time, a truly workable symbiotic relationship.

Political structure can play a major part in the lives of ordinary people. "The Menzies era" – (Robert Menzies was prime minister from 1949 – 1966: Townsend 1988: p7) internally provided a time of great political and social

stability in Australia. This was the time span that the young George Stevens was gaining his navy skills, dating and marrying, then starting a family. Menzies was an ardent royalist, and even after the events of World War II, patriotism and national pride still rated highly with most white Australians. With the new Queen Elizabeth's coronation in 1953, fever for all things British was once again at a peak. George Stevens took part in the Coronation Contingent representing our military forces; he volunteered for the role and was offered a place in this commission, his patriotism matching the mood of the times.

The external political influence and manoeuvrings that involved Australia in The Korean War (1950-1953) was a defining factor in placing this country in the post-World War II world (Evans 2000: p3) The RAN's involvement took George overseas once more on the HMAS Sydney. The Sydney with its Fleet Air Arm squadrons attacked enemy supply lines and supported allied forces from October 1951 to January 1952. Australia's involvement was seen as vital by the government of the time to help secure allies in the Asia Pacific region, mainly the USA, and to show its binding commitment as a member of the new United Nations Organisation (Evans: p4). Australia had now entered the Cold War era. George was there at this defining moment in Australian war time and political history.

Creating a stable environment for family life was extremely important to George, particularly since his own early experience of family life had not been happy. He realised early on that financial security was an important factor in this need for stability, so a reassessment of his naval options took place. The navy provided a wonderful life at the time for a young unattached male – however with his marriage to Nancy in 1953 his perspective changed. The military way of life required frequent moving, which was hard on family members, George also had reached a point in the naval hierarchy where he could move no further, seniority took precedence over youth and talent. The synchronicity between valued recruit and institution had come to an end - it was time to move on.

With the enormous amount of Post-war reconstruction going on world-wide through the 1950's and the beginning of the new technology age in the 1960's, new types of employment and opportunities arose. Large international corporations looking to set up business in the Asia/Pacific region saw Australia as the ideal platform to launch their expansion. Good staff with specialised skills and new ideas was sought and George was employed by IBM as a technician. The corporate structure at IBM allowed for talented individuals to rise through the ranks irrespective of age, rewarding George with a manager's role for his efforts. He had at last an interesting job with good pay to support his growing family (by now Nancy and George had two children). IBM required work relocation, so moving to Melbourne, Sydney and New Zealand occurred over the next few years. This issue of stable location for family life had not been completely resolved until the family finally bought a house and settled in Greenwich, Sydney. This provided a good base for work, the children's development and schooling, services and social life.

Work at IBM and family became the centre of George's life for the next 25 years, his work ethic, commitment to loyalty and obligation remaining strong. Disillusionment finally set in however, in the late 1980's when, "large-scale redundancy programs were in vogue with many large-sized firms, (IBM included) ... saw these programs as solutions to their problems" (Gandolfi: 2009). This trend was not unique to IBM, as technology underwent enormous changes, many major institutions like banks, insurance companies and government departments experienced the brain drain that became a flood when "a variety of financial incentives were offered to encourage a growing proportion of the older workforce to retire or leave the labour market early" (Blundell: 2002). "As a direct consequence, new management theories and concepts, sometimes cynically referred to as management fads, regularly emerged and were frequently, and at times, desperately adopted by firms trying to gain a leading edge" (Gandolfi: 2009). This relentless pursuit of downsizing proved disastrous in the long term for many organisations as much experience and accumulated wisdom was lost from both the private and public domain. It was at this point that

George Stevens decided to leave IBM – although he retained a consultant's position with the company for several years.

Early retirement can present its own set of problems for those who are unprepared, an undeniable factor being that “most people will have less income when they retire” (Australian Bureau of Statistics: 2009). For George financial security still remained a major priority, so he and Nancy bought and restored a number of homes in Greenwich increasing their financial standing and equity thereby facilitating social mobility as well. The late 1980's saw the first of the massive housing booms in Sydney real estate facilitated by worldwide economic growth and share market increases, allowing many Sydneysiders like George, to benefit from house price rises. Subsequent moves both away from and back to Sydney have brought George and Nancy to their present home in Berowra where life's journey has come almost full circle, family commitment and affiliations being of upmost importance to this couple in later life.

George's life pattern can be seen to have been greatly influenced by the interaction between the personal triumphs and tragedies of his own private “biographical sphere and social setting” (Mills 1959: p8) and the issues that effected the larger structures of public, political and historical domains. Despite the many challenges these interactions caused - George Stevens can “look back with a curious sense of astonishment that it has all turned out so well ... as a generation, they have had the closest thing imaginable to a dream run” (Mackay: p56).

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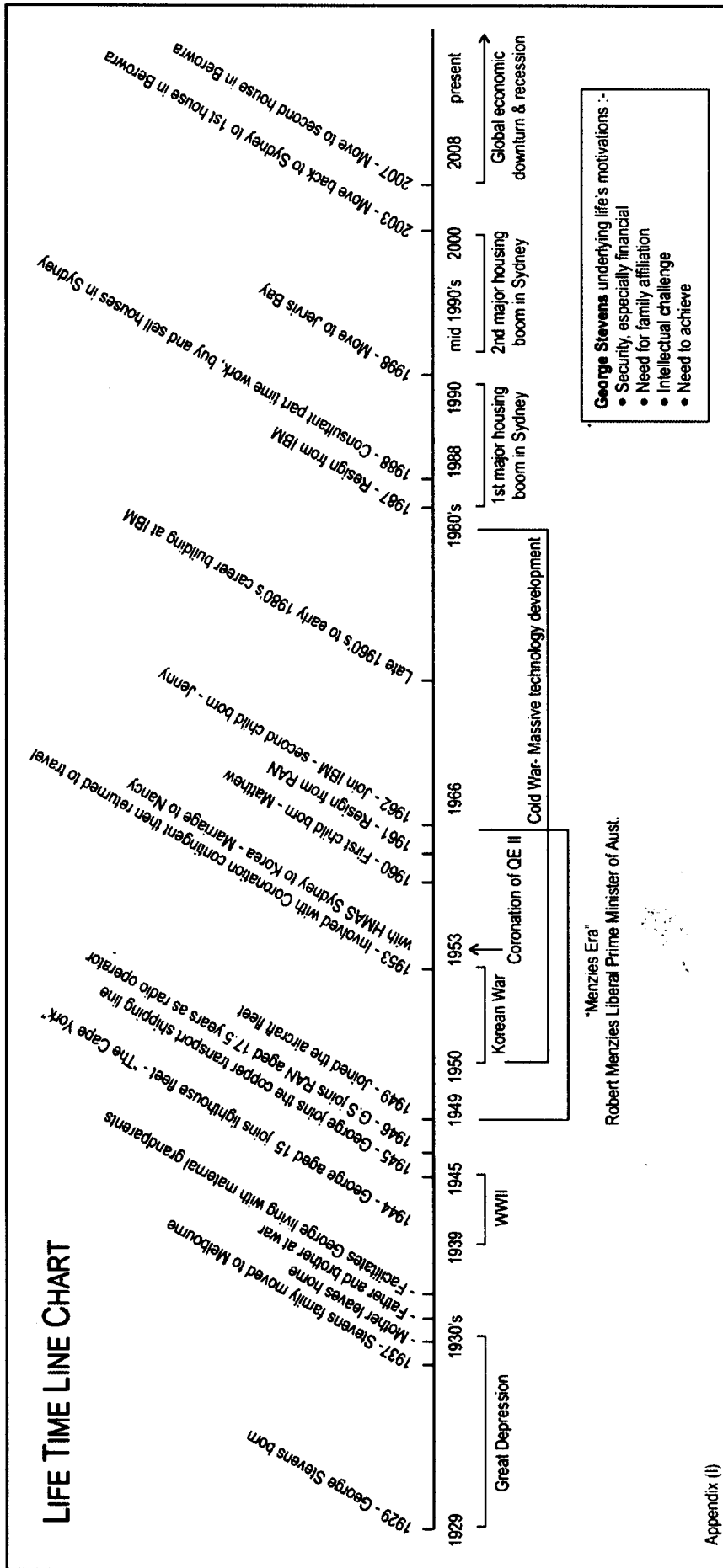
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LIFE TIME LINE CHART



Appendix (I)